

# The idea of the citizen in the University

## Engin Isin on the tensions between the citizen, the scholar, the student and the state

**CA News:** You are well known for your innovative research on citizenship and as I understand it, and to put it very crudely, you have developed the concept of ‘acts of citizenship’ as a tool for rethinking how we might better understand political membership and indeed, to contest the normative belief in citizenship as simply a Statist enterprise. Not only do you examine the nature of political subjectivity but also, you re-map and problematise the conditions of exclusion. I say ‘re-map’ because your work puts aside normative assumptions about the nature of political agency based on concepts such as participation. Instead, ‘acts of citizenship’ opens up a perspective from which we can better understand how subjectivity is enacted in for example, illegal migrants or ‘others’, who are not necessarily recognised as political agents.

**Isin:** What we are trying to do with the concept ‘acts of citizenship’ is to open repertoires of action that can be considered as performing citizenship. Over the years our understanding (and popular interpreta-

tions) of such repertoires have become increasingly narrow: voting, volunteering, public and military service, and paying taxes. All that talk about ‘active citizenship’ turns out to be quite passively held rights by those who already hold the legal status of citizenship. Yet, across the world many people are experimenting with and creating repertoires with inventive labels such as ‘artist citizens’, ‘journalist citizens’, ‘scientist citizens’, ‘worker citizens’ and ‘migrant citizens’. These adjectives unsettle the already received passive descriptions such as ‘ordinary citizens’ or ‘good citizens’. What they signify is a move from passively held rights to actively sought claims regardless of the legal status of the claimant. For these reasons we have found it useful to contrast the traditional ‘active citizenship’ with ‘activist citizenship’. Of course, to make such a designation is not without its problems. How do we differentiate extremist and populist movements that also mobilise activism or militancy from activist citizenship? The coupling of ‘activism’ and ‘citizenship’ already does this work by indicating that we are

seeking to highlight non-violent and democratic repertoires of action. This is where the concept of ‘acts’ becomes most evocative. Since our understanding of citizenship moves away from whether a person is qualified to do something to considering whether the thing done (the act or deed) is of citizenship or not, we focus on the act itself and its effects. People rarely if ever act randomly. There are repertoires that people learn over time by becoming engaged with whatever issues exercise them. Some repertoires such as ‘civil disobedience’ or ‘conscientious objection’ become indispensable for the enactment of democratic citizenship. Others such as ‘electronic petitions’ are more recent and we don’t yet know how effective they will prove. But we can learn a lot from how people experiment with these repertoires and invent new ones and by so doing expand the meanings of citizenship.

**CA News:** Given the wide scope and richness of your work, I am curious to know your thoughts on how one might understand the University as a space that forms ‘citizens’. That is, what do you

**make of the Janus-faced character of the institution as, on the one hand, presenting itself as a space of equality, mobility and cosmopolitan membership (the hangover of the values of the Enlightenment) and on the other hand, the conversion of its managerial systems into an administrative apparatus of the Home Office for the purposes of monitoring and policing ‘International’ students, i.e., immigrants? How might we understand this complex mix through the lens of your own research?**

**Isin:** Arguably, the university from its medieval or even earlier origins, has always been a rather strange mix. And the values of ‘equality, mobility and cosmopolitanism’ are more recent inventions than the Enlightenment era when a certain elitism pervaded despite the rhetoric. My experience of the university over the last 25 years or so in Turkey, Canada and the UK is that it is a space of possibility. A space where critical openness to challenging ideas is maintained and thinking about things differently is cultivated. These values

are not unique to the university but it is where they are most explicitly articulated and are crucial to the production of knowledge. But it is also a space of contestation if not confrontation. Because such critical openness often threatens dominant interests that seek closeness, the university becomes a space where a tension is played out. The tension manifests itself on the contested values that comprise that figure we call the scholar. The image of the citizen articulated by scholars in the university often does not quite match the needs of governments (liberal, neoliberal, or illiberal) who’d rather cultivate carefully scripted repertoires through which people are expected to behave like scholars and citizens. The Janus-faced character of the institution is a symptom of this tension. In Britain, for example, on the one hand, the audit apparatus increasingly impedes the ability of universities to render autonomous judgement on what they need to teach and research. On the other hand, the highly problematic intrusion of the UKBA into universities to monitor their international (non-EU) students damages the trust re-

lationship that is so fundamental to education. It seems in Britain the electoral chances of a party depends on how it plays the ‘immigration’ card. The impossible division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrants spurs a security apparatus and there are more borders everywhere. The issue of ‘bogus’ versus ‘genuine’ students turns into introducing a monitoring apparatus in every university. Recently, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee denounced the UKBA as not fit for purpose with catastrophic failure of leadership. It remains to be seen what replaces it and what practices it will engender. Meanwhile, we have a right to ask if the UKBA had been ‘fit for purpose’ would the universities have been dragged into the monitoring business in the first place. The struggle for critical openness continues so does the vigilance that it requires.

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# ‘Foreignness’ through the eyes of a citizen

I left London to move to Mexico City not long after finishing university in late 2010 in order to be with my girlfriend with whom I’d been in a long-distance relationship for almost two years. At the time I was feeling rather sardonic and quite fed-up with London if truth be told, in no small part due the coalition’s campaign against higher education as well as my mounting suspicion that my generation were all zombies. Throughout my teens I had surrounded myself with people who liked to think of themselves as “young radicals”, yet when the opportunity for revolution finally arose, their actions amounted to little more than protest-themed warehouse raves and after-parties. And so, with little or no faith left in my countrymen, and the belief that all Londoners were either puritanical xenophobes or asinine hipsters, I took a one-way ticket to Mexico City and, as of yet, have not returned.

However, Mexico did more for me than just allow my girlfriend and I, (she is now my wife), to live legally in the same country with relative ease. It showed me for the first time what it was like to be a foreigner, a status that is often treated with social stigma in the United Kingdom and interestingly enough, provided me with opportunities I had have never had in my native land.

In Mexico City, which is now my indefinite home, I am currently working as an English Language teacher at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), one of Latin America’s most prestigious higher education institutions. For me, being a foreigner did not put me at any kind of disadvantage. I have never experienced the kind of social stigma that foreigners are regularly subjected to in the UK. I have been treated with nothing but courtesy and tolerance, as there is a much more relaxed attitude towards different social groups in Mexico.

I find Mexico’s markedly relaxed attitude towards foreignness,

in comparison to the cultural racism I witnessed growing up (and occasionally experienced, due in some part to my partially Sudanese heritage and somewhat Arab features) incredibly interesting.

The topic of immigration and the presence of foreigners in the UK, both legal and otherwise, is a complex issue, one that an overwhelming majority of Britons are greatly concerned about, but which only a handful seem able to talk about with much authority; I being no exception.

Back in London I met many numbers of people, the vast majority of which were invariably white, who were eager to share their so-called “views” on the controversial subject, particularly after a few too many pints. These types of conversations led me to believe that Britain’s concerns about immigrants sneaking into the country illegally and stealing the jobs that should be going to hard-working natives, merely boiled down to an inherent mistrust of foreigners, something which seems to be a part of the UK’s cultural heritage. This, and a somewhat paranoid idea that something was being lost, or rather diluted, by multiculturalism. This seems to stem from the belief that is held by far too many Brits that white, Christian Britons are somehow more British than those born and raised in the same country, but with a more mixed racial heritage. In this case, ‘foreignness’ does not simply refer to visitors from other countries, but also British citizens who fall into the same category due to the ethnicity of their parents, or even grandparents, (if the BNP are to be taken seriously, which obviously they should not).

I spent the greater part of my youth growing up in East London in the borough of Tower Hamlets, a notoriously ‘multicultural area’. While there is no denying that areas such as Whitechapel are rich with racial diversity, there is not so much

a sense of multiculturalism as there is grudging coexistence and animosity, particularly between Bangladeshi and Caucasians, the latter colloquially referring to the area as ‘the Isle of Wogs’.

I am aware of the extent to which many residents in the UK have exploited our admittedly vulnerable welfare system, though I do not believe this is a phenomenon unique to immigrants. I also cannot help but feel that the notion of being a foreigner is all about handouts from the government, priority housing benefits and underserved, special treatment is largely exaggerated by fear-mongering xenophobes. From what I’ve experienced, racism is still a huge part of British culture and difference of any kind is greatly stigmatized; both foreigners and British-born minorities have an equally tough time and are forced to deal with a level of discrimination and social inequality that is certainly not present in Mexico. ‘Foreignness’ in any form, is not welcomed in Britain, but rather feared and despised by the large majority, an attitude that has only been exacerbated by blind political-correctness (essentially, a cuddlier version of racism) and the current economic climate.

Amid increasing fears of a national invasion by hordes of asylum seekers and benefits grabbing Asians maliciously trying to destroy Britain, new laws concerning spouse immigration, put forward by Theresa May, have now made it almost impossible for me to ever return to London with my wife and enjoy a life there together. While I can only imagine that many Brits will consider this a wise move, I cannot help but feel that the message being sent out to interracial couples by the government is - “we don’t want any more foreigners on our soil, and if you’re depraved enough to want to marry one, we don’t want you either.”

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Above, graffiti on the walls of Central St. Martins College of Art and Design, artfully framed by the authorities and below, the main plaza of the shopping mall art college.